

Major Samuel T. Cushing - The Acting Signal Corps (1894?)  
from Kansas Commanding M.O.L.L.U.S. War Papers

The Signal Service is due to the genius of Albert J. Myer. In his early life he was an enthusiast in the study of sign language and made that the subject of his thesis when he graduated. He entered the Army in 1854 as an Assistant Surgeon and in 1856 prepared a memorandum for Army Signaling and in 1858 succeeded in having a Military Board organized to consider it. He worked faithfully with his scheme and finally succeeded in having a law passed by congress as follows, "and that there be added to the Staff of the Army one signal officer with the rank, pay and allowances of a Major of Cavalry who shall have charge, under the direction of the Secretary of War, of all signal duty and of all books, papers and apparatus connected therewith."

I call attention to this law which signifies all duties and all apparatus because upon the construction "of all" Major Myer had later many difficulties to encounter.

This law was approved June 21, 1860, and on June 27, 1860, Albert J. Myer was appointed as Major and Signal Officer.

I graduated from the Military Academy in June 1860, and business called me to General Scott's Headquarters in New York about the last of August 1860. I then met Major Myer who was awaiting orders to go to New Mexico to introduce his system during actual operations in the Navajo War then pending in New Mexico. My orders were to join the 10th Infantry, then engaged in the same campaign.

We had a slight conversation and parted, hoping to meet later.

In November 1860, I joined Co. 'A', 10th Infantry, at Fort Fauntleroy, New Mexico, and again met Major Myer.

Early in February 1861, the campaign was over and Major Myer was ordered to Santa Fe. He asked that I might be detailed to command his escort and when he reached Santa Fe, the Department Headquarters, I was placed on detached service as his assistant for experimental practice. This duty occupied about six weeks, when Major Myer was ordered to Washington about the last of April. Early in May I joined the 2nd Infantry by promotion and was stationed with my company in Washington. Here I again met Major Myer and was once more detailed as his assistant.

When the war broke out, Major Myer endeavored to introduce his system and was prompt to suggest its practical value, but found the officials too busy to give him much attention. Among the officers of the Army who had been instructed by him at Fort Hamilton and in New Mexico during his preliminary practice, several had joined the enemy, (Lieut. afterwards General C. M. Wilcox, Lieut. E. P. Alexander, Lieut. B. F. Sloan, Lieut. W. W. McCreary) and the system was thus introduced into the Confederate Army. Early in the operations, lights and waving flags were seen on the Virginia Hills in the enemy's camps. Then a small class of eleven officers of our army was collected, about June 10, 1861, at Fortress Monroe, and hastily instructed, but were not called into the field. The battle of Bull Run occurred, and our army and no

No signal officers, while the enemy had an organized corps. Immediately after that battle details were made, principally from the Pennsylvania Reserves, and a camp of instruction was established at Red Hill, Georgetown. A few of the officers previously instructed at Fort Monroe were ordered to this camp as Instructors, and on September 12, 1861, it was organized and I was in command.

It was all chaos -- one officer with two enlisted men from each regiment of the Pennsylvania Reserves reported for duty and had to be provided with every thing -- the quartermasters stores, tents, wagons, horses and all of the camp and garrison equipage, -- ordnance stores saddles, bridles, picket lines, etc., -- subsistence stores and signal property. I was Post Commander, Quartermaster, Ordnance officer, Adjutant, Commissary, Signal Officer and Superintendent of schools.

Two large hospital tents were erected and became the school tents. Morning and afternoons the officers under instruction waved small round sticks and learned the signal alphabet. Outside the enlisted men were drilled in the motions of the flags. The enlisted men were not instructed as to the meaning of the motions. The officers were provided after a short time with telescopes and marine-glasses and then had what was termed a "signal kit."

This small nucleus was vigorously instructed. Horses, etc., were procured for each, and riding drills were instituted. They were soon proficient and late in the fall were capable of acting as Instructors. Then an order was issued that each brigade in the Army of the Potomac should send three officers and six men for instruction. Not more than half this number reported.

About 80 officers and 160 men reported.

Early in October the expedition known as the Port Royal expedition, under command of General T. W. Sherman, applied for a detail of signal officers, and a detachment of seven officers was sent from the camp, commanded by Lieutenant E. J. Keenan, 11th Pennsylvania Reserves.

In December 1861, Major-General Buell asked for a detail for the Department of the Ohio, and Lieutenant Jesse Merrill, 7th Pennsylvania Reserves, with 5 officers and 10 men were detailed.

General Burnside before starting on his North Carolina Campaign applied for a detail, and 3 officers and 6 men, commanded by Lieutenant Joseph Fricker, 8th Pennsylvania Reserves, were sent.

Each officer, sent as commanding officer, asked for extra details, and at once instituted a camp of instruction in the army to which he was assigned and soon had reinforcement.

At midnight on March 9, 1861, an order was received from General McClellan for the camp at Georgetown to take the field. The camp was struck by daylight. The officers were divided into sections under different chiefs and reported to the various corps commanders for service with each corps.

On the 14th of March, 1862, a detachment of 3 officers and six men was detailed and ordered to report to General Halleck, commanding the Department of the Mississippi -- Lieutenant J. B. Ludwick commanded this party.



On the same day Lieutenant E. H. Russell, 9th Pennsylvania Reserve Corps, with 3 officers and 6 men, was ordered to report to General B. F. Butler at New Orleans.

These small parties immediately commenced instruction of others, and a signal corps was soon started in the Western Army. The balance of the camp remained with the Army of the Potomac.

Major Myer went with that Army as its Chief Signal Officer and his history and that of his detachment is well known.

There was scarcely any action or skirmish in which the corps did not take part. Seeking the most conspicuous places in order to command the view and keep up communications, they were frequently exposed to heavy fire of artillery and often whilst under fire of musketry continued the waving of the flags, giving information as to the location and movements of the enemy and transmitting directions for the movement of our troops.

During the Port Royal and Burnside expeditions and also along the James River, they kept open communication between the land and naval forces, when the naval signals were impotent to do so.

It is narrated that in the west after Farragut had overcome the torpedos, ram, and other defences of Mobile, he was in great danger of collision with the Lackawanna and, as his Navy Signals were incomplete, he sent for the Army Signal Officer, Lieut. Kinney, who had been detailed to his service and said, "Can you say 'For God's sake' by signal." When told that by the Army method one could signal anything -- he sent his hasty and historic message to the Lackawanna: "For God's sake get out of our way."

When the Signal Corps took the field it was necessary that some one should remain in charge of the Office in Washington, to receive reports, attend to the correspondence, look after supplies and oversee the multitude of matters accumulating. I was directed to take charge.

Whilst the Corps was consolidated in the Camp of Instruction, it was easy to supply the men; but as soon as they got into the field difficulties arose.

The Quartermasters declined to issue forage, etc., except upon requisitions properly approved. A small detachment stationed on some mountain would need supplies and present requisitions. The Quartermaster of the Brigade nearest at hand would say, "he would'nt issue out of stock on hand, as he had made no estimates." The Brigadier-General would decline to approve as the party was not borne upon the rolls of his command. Constant trouble arose and was reported to the Washington Office. An interview was held with the Secretary of War and, on May 29, 1862, an order was published directing Quartermasters and Commissaries to issue to Signal parties serving in their vicinity upon the requisition of the officer in charge of such parties. Thereafter no difficulty occurred and the Signal parties were as well equipped and supplied as any other part of the Army.

During the Spring of 1862, the party sent to General Halleck succeeded in obtaining details of officers and men for instruction and soon had a good signal party educated. When the movements of the Army commenced it happened that it struck a wooded country. The Generals in command being ignorant of the necessity of keeping the party together to be of service

"after getting out of the woods," ordered all the detached officers back to their regiments as they "could not signal in the woods." Another interview with the Secretary of War resulted in the publication on June 18, 1862, of an order that directed, that officers detached from their regiments should report for orders to the Signal Officer of the Army, after which they will not be relieved from such duty except by orders from the Adjutant General of the Army

This gave a permanency to the details and officers took more interest in a duty they were not liable to be relieved from at the whim of each Commander.

Ever since the formation of Armies there has been jealousy by each Commander. Every one having command wants more and always resists any encroachment upon what he may consider as his prerogative. An amusing incident, (except to a few young officers, who were the sufferers,) occurred whilst the Camp was in operation at Georgetown. Washington City was overrun with officers and stringent orders were published regarding passes. No one was permitted to appear on the streets without a pass, properly signed by the Commanding officer of the Regiment, approved by the Commander of the Division or of an Independent Brigade.

General Andrew Porter was Provost-marshal General and took pains to enforce the order vigorously. Any officer found in the city without a pass was taken in by the Provost Guard and, if after office hours, was carried to the Franklin Square Guardhouse, there to remain until he was relieved by proper authority.

The Signal Camp was not attached to any division or independent brigade. It was just a camp of Lieutenants, commanded by a Lieutenant. The large number of Lieutenants, between 80 and 90, caused quite a number of passes (restricted to about 12 per day) to be issued, and Adjutant General Seth Williams provided me with a supply of Headquarters Army of the Potomac passes, that, he told me, I could sign for the use of my officers, as he considered the Camp as attached to the Headquarters.

I used these passes and all went well until one night when an energetic patrol commander overtook a party of signal officers "in bulk". They all exhibited my passes and were informed that they were "no go," that Lieut Cushing was not an Adjutant-General nor an Aide-de-Camp, and that a pass signed by him as by order of General McClellan, was not worth the paper it was written on.

The officers were taken to the Franklin Square prison and locked in for the night. The next morning they were released and came at once to me, indignantly complaining. At once I went to Headquarters, stated the case, and a letter was at once sent to the Provost-marshal General stating that "for the purpose of granting passes, the Signal Camp of Instruction, Lieut S. T. Cushing, Commanding, was considered as an Independent Brigade."

After that the Signal officers put on airs and I increased the number of passes "adlibitum."



The duties of the office were generally routine. I established a system for accountability for signal-property and prepared the necessary blanks, still, I believe, in use.

To show the exact method with which accounts were examined I will tell an incident that occurred. About the time of the surrender of Harper's Ferry a number of General officers of which General Rufus Saxton was the head, were directed to proceed to that place as investigators, and I was sent for, to appear at the War Department.

The Assist. Secretary of War, Mr. P. H. Watson, received me and directed me to send at once, for the use of the party, six marine-glasses. I returned soon afterwards with the glasses and also with a special requisition and receipts for them. This requisition I handed to the Adjutant-General of the Army, General Lorenzo Thomas, who approved it by order of the Secretary of War. I then proceeded to Mr. Watson's office and deposited the marine-glasses. Mr. Watson said, "Just leave them here and I will deliver them." I asked him to whom I should make invoices and who would receipt, stating that I was held responsible for them and a receipt was necessary for my protection. He said "He didn't know" but immediately afterwards said "hand me the papers, I will sign the receipts" -- and he did so. I went back to my office and sent him invoices.

My impression was that I was quite secure. I had an order of the Secretary of War to transfer six marine-glasses to the Assistant Secretary of War and I held the Assistant's receipt.

In 1866 the Auditor got hold of my papers and disallowed the transaction saying, "No authority existed in law or regulations for the transfer of public property pertaining to the Military Service to a Civilian."--!!!

I was six months getting these marine-glasses hunted up.

After the Army of the Potomac returned from the Peninsula the Signal Officers were stationed around the Forts in Virginia and then with the Army, proceeded to Maryland, where they were conspicuously engaged at the battles of South Mountain and Antietam. Soon after the battle of Antietam I was directed to relieve Major Myer as Chief Signal Officer of the Army of the Potomac. I found a good working corps. In addition to signals by flags Major Myer had attached a small Field Telegraph Train to his organization. A light wagon held about 5 miles of insulated wire, running from a reel. This wire was hung upon trees and suspended from small poles or along fences and connected two small magnetic batteries that worked a pointer upon a dial similar to a clock that jumped from letter to letter thus spelling out a message.

The wire was constantly out of order. I rode along the line several times and discovered that our brave soldiers, on seeing the wire, thought it was some rebel contrivance connected with masked batteries and occupied themselves in cutting out little pieces to send home as souvenirs, or to mend their shoes, or use as strings, etc.

I at once took action by moving it about through the various brigades in the Army to familiarize the men with it and whenever it was cut, I notified the Brigade Commander nearest at hand, who published an order explaining its use, and in a few weeks the wire was as jealously guarded by the men as was possible.

During the battle of Fredericksburg, as I was passing along the line leading from Headquarters to Franklin's crossing, I noticed a line of men about ten feet apart on each side of the wire. I enquired what they were doing and obtained the response that "they were watching that telegraph wire." There had been no call for guards for that purpose, and I assumed that these gentlemen had found it hot on the pontoons and had retired to a place of safety, when they noticed the wire and established themselves as guards, so as to have some excuse for staying in the rear.

I joined the Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac at Pleasant Valley, Maryland, on October 27, 1862, when it was resting after the two severe battles it had just passed through.

General McCellan sent for me and asked me how many instruments and miles of telegraph wire I had, and directed that I should ask for more, for he said: "When I start from this camp I purpose to break loose from the regular telegraph lines and depend upon those under my own command." In a few days the Headquarters had Reached Rectortown, Va., and a special messenger reached him with written orders to turn over the command of the Army to General Burnside. A few days were taken by General Burnside to gain information, and the Army moved on to Fredericksburg, expecting soon to reach there and move at once "on to Richmond." It reached Falmouth and found the enemy occupying Fredericksburg. There were delays in obtaining pontoons, etc., and immediate attack could not be made, so the movement was delayed until the battle of Fredericksburg, December 11th to 16th, 1862.

Signal officers were stationed at various points to connect the batteries located at the different hills on our side of the Rappahannock with the Headquarters, and with each other, and also to be able to open communication at once with any troops that might cross the river. Detachments were also sent to each of the principal bridges with instructions to cross with the advance guards of each grand division and select at Fredericksburg suitable positions from which to communicate with the stations already established. Other detachments were also directed to move to the front as our army advanced and communicate to these interior stations in Fredericksburg.

About 5 P. M. on the 11th, a portion of General Franklin's troops crossed the river. At this crossing Lieutenants J. C. Wiggins and George J. Clarke with their flagmen, preceded the other troops and ran to a hill. They found they could not stay there alone, so they returned to the line of skirmishers and opened communications by flag with the Headquarters. They kept up their communications until 10 P. M.

Lieut. J. B. Brooks, and C. F. Stone crossed with the advance of General Couch's corps and occupied a station in the steeple of the Court House at Fredericksburg. The waving of flags attracted the attention of the enemy who continually shelled the steeple during the whole battle. The officers on duty there were relieved from time to time, but the station was occupied until December 15, when the enemy had accurate range prepared, and several shells struck the steeple rendering it absolutely untenable for signals, when it was abandoned. On December 14, a station



on the left of the city was withdrawn at the request of the surgeon in charge of a Field Hospital near at hand and placed at a point not visible to the enemy, as the enemy was continuously shelling the station. During the battle of the 12th, the earliest reports of progress from General Couch on the right and General Franklin on the left were through the efforts of the Signal Corps. In my report of this battle, I made the following remark: "It is claimed for the Signal Corps of the Army of the Potomac that it was the first to introduce on this continent as a medium of communication upon the field of battle the magnetic telegraph."

At 4 A. M. on the 11th instant communication was successfully opened by the field telegraph line from Headquarters (the Phillips House) to a point at the extreme left of the line. When General Franklin's advance reached this point on the left, the station moved with him, crossed the river and the line was continually used by him until his division recrossed the river.

On December 12th, another line was established to the Lacey House on the bank of the river. Both these stations were exposed to artillery fire.

On December 16th the forces re-crossed the river and went into winter quarters. During this interval the stations were kept up. The Signal Corps kept moving its stations from time to time, built observatories, stations on the trees and elsewhere, and was continuously reporting new smokes and dusts, indicating new camps or movements on the part of the enemy.

After the Fredericksburg battle was over and whilst we lay in camp, active measures were taken to put in repair all the telegraph instruments -- the wire was all repaired, new reels of wire were obtained, and in a short time everything was ready for new operations.

A low mutter gradually grew louder among the men. Some had not been paid for six months or more. Each enlisted <sup>a</sup>man in the Corps was on detached service and paid upon his descriptive list.

Those stationed at various Corps Headquarters were convenient and were paid every two months, when the Paymaster came down to pay the regiments, but some of the Signal Corps were not so fortunate. They were posted at detached stations, some three, four or five miles away from any troops, and as the visits of the Paymaster were irregular, could not tell when to call for their pay, and were so left over until next pay-day, and again missed. The matter commenced to grow monstrous. I had urged the various Paymasters to make some effort to pay these men, but could get no satisfaction. I represented the case to General Burnside, and he sent me to Washington to consult with the Paymaster-General. It took but a short interview. It was arranged that I should take up all the descriptive lists and make a general pay-roll for the whole corps in the Potomac Army. This roll was prepared at the end of each two months, generally in two sheets, one for those stationed on the right of the Army, and the other for those on the left. As soon as prepared, a reliable officer took one sheet and visited each signal station on the right and procured all the signatures. Another officer took the other sheet to the left, and

in two days all the signatures were procured. Separate lists were prepared authorizing me to collect the money for each man and were signed by the men to whom pay was due. I then made another trip to Washington, collected the pay, and on my return distributed it to the men, taking another receipt from them for my personal protection. After this arrangement the Signal Corps was paid as promptly as any branch of the Army. Major W. B. Rochester of the Volunteers, the late Paymaster-General, was the Paymaster designated to make these payments.

There were not many movements of troops after the battle of Fredericksburg and everything was quiet upon the Rappahannock. General Burnside was relieved from command and General Hooker succeeded him.

I was on sick-leave of absence, but was continued as Chief Acting Signal Officer.

I returned from leave of absence in March 1863, but was stopped at Washington on temporary duty on a board establishing rules and regulations to govern the Signal Camp of Instructions that had been re-established at Georgetown. I soon finished this duty, and on April 4, 1863, returned to the Army of the Potomac still in camp in Falmouth, Va. About the middle of April activity in the various supply departments seemed to indicate that we would soon be up and doing.

On the 27th of April I received instructions from the Chief of Staff to establish signal telegraph lines from Headquarters to Bank's Ford and also to Franklin's Crossing; this was at once done, and on April

28th I extended the line from Bank's Ford to United States Ford. The detachments used the wire in use from Belle Plaine to Headquarters, taking it up a distance of 11 miles and then relayed it to U. S. Ford, a total distance while taking up and relaying wire of 35 miles, in one day. On April 29th a complete line of flag stations from Buckner's Neck to the Phillips House was established.

On April 30th, the signal telegraph line was placed under charge of the Morse operators who had more powerful batteries. The Signal Corps kept the wires in order.

On May 1st Captain B. F. Fisher who was in charge of the movements on the right established on the top of a tree, 1-1/2 mile east of Chancellorsville, a station of observation. The Army retired and the station was abandoned.

On May 2nd, General Sedgewick crossed the river, and with him were sent a number of officers with directions to keep open communications with the Phillips House.

On May 3d, signal stations were established in Fredericksburg in a church tower communicating with Falmouth and with General Sedgewick who continued his advance. At 5 P. M. General Sedgewick had advanced beyond Fredericksburg and was moving towards his right to reinforce General Hooker at Chancellorsville.



The enemy swept in again and commenced shelling the signal tower. They were so rapid in the movement that the signal party was nearly captured, but it scattered and got away safely.

At 5.30 P. M. Lieutenant A. B. Jerome and his party swam the river with his magnetic batteries and wire and established a station in the line of skirmishers south of Bank's Ford.

This action was bold and daring, but as no necessity existed for telegraph messages to skirmishers he was ordered to return to his proper station.

On May 4th, the enemy again occupied Fredericksburg and was also in force between General Sedgwick and General Hooker--Practically cut off from all communications except by signals. A line of communication was kept up until General Sedgwick was forced to retire towards Bank's Ford. As he moved on he found another station at Bank's Ford with which he opened communication over the heads of the enemy, and thus practically was within communication with General Hooker at Chancellorsville.

During the night General Sedgwick re-crossed the river at Bank's Ford. or May 5th, nearly our whole army was now at or near Bank's Ford or United States Ford. A small force under General Gibbon was in the vicinity of Falmouth. General Alfred Pleasanton with a force of cavalry was patrolling the river down as far as Port Royal. He kept actively moving his command to various points so as to give a show of force and asked me for signal officers to assist him, by waving flags on various hills and other places to keep up the impression that we had a good force on hand to guard the river.

I furnished all I had available.

One of the most furious storms began at 2 P. M. and continued all night. At United States Ford the right wing of the army was preparing to retire to the north side of the river. It had vacated its intrenchments when suddenly the bridge was washed away. No other communication than by signals was available. The heavy rain had so swollen the river that it was impossible to ford it. Lieutenant John S. Holland, Signal Officer, was in charge of the Signal Station. The storm was so great that it was found that signals would not answer. Lieutenant Holland volunteered to swim the river with dispatches. A little lull in the storm and it was decided to try signals. At 9 P. M. an order was sent by signal torches to suspend the movement until the bridges could be repaired. At 1.20 A. M. an order was again sent to continue the movement, and by daylight our army was on the north side of the Rappahannock, and the battle of Chancellorsville was over.

Shortly after the battle I was relieved from duty as Acting Chief Signal Officer of the Army of the Potomac and ordered to Washington.

I had been appointed as Major and Signal Officer in the new corps just organized and my duties were to be those of Inspector. Little birds had whispered to me that Colonel Myer was not in favor with the Secretary of War and that his persistency in claiming that the law gave him the charge of all signals, both electric and others, in opposition to Stager, Eckerts and others, connected with what was termed the Military Telegraph, was getting him disliked. I had been Myer's principal assistant

up to date and knew that if he was disapproved I would fall under the same blow. I had been examined by the Board and had been recommended for the appointment of Lieutenant-Colonel. I received the appointment of Junior Major and declined it. This made a change in my status and I was not ordered on inspection duty. I lingered about Washington waiting orders and practically shelved. I asked to be relieved and ordered to duty as Commissary to no avail.

General Lee commenced his movement towards Maryland and Pennsylvania. General Early, Mosby and others made their raids toward Washington, and I spent three days and nights in the dome of the Capitol watching the Virginia shore.

I was finally ordered to West Point, N. Y., as the only graduate who had the knowledge, to introduce at the Military Academy a course of Instruction in Military Signals. I reached there in July and commenced Instruction. This course was completed by the last of September. I again applied for orders and could get none.

On November 10, 1863, Colonel Myer was relieved from the command of the Corps and ordered to Cairo, Ills. He was not confirmed in his appointments as Colonel and it was decided that he was out of service.

Major Nicodemus was placed in command and I applied again for orders and could get none. I asked permission to go to Washington and it was declined. I was practically shelved and remained at West Point doing nothing until February 1864, when I was relieved from duty as Acting Signal Officer and ordered to report to General Thomas, commanding the Department of the Cumberland, at Chattanooga, Tenn., for duty in the Subsistence Department.

The Signal Corps was organized. The various armes all had signal officers and they soon made themselves known and appreciated. (None of the first detachments were received kindly. No one seemed to appreciate them. They were ridiculed and sneered at. Every article of equipage issued to them was done in grudging manner, as if so much robbed from the hard working soldier who did the fighting. Before the war was over it had gained a firm place in the army. Commanding Generals commenced to appréciate it and made many complimentary reports as to its service. General Sherman has said that its services in transmitting his message to General Corse at Allatoona was worth more to the country then all the money that had been appropriated to support the Corps from the day it was founded.

Admiral Farragut has testified his appreciation of its services.

Generals McClellan, Burnside, Hooker, Meade and hundreds of others have praised it. Its duties were unabitious. No stirring reports of individualheroism, of magnificent charges were made by its officers. Its officers simple staid at their stations and did their duty.